Bi-1060
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United States Department of Agriculture
Bureau of Biological Survey

RAISING MUSKRATS

Many persons unfamiliar with the industry of raising muskrats have been deceived by statements that these valuable fur-bearing animals can be produced profitably in small pens. This, however, is not the case. The first essential in muskrat farming is a good marsh or similar water area of at least a few hundred acres in extent, in which the animals are or have been found naturally.

Areas adapted to muskrat production are of three main classes, grouped in the order of their importance: (1) Marsh areas; (2) swamps; (3) ponds, lakes, streams, canals, and other bodies of water without marshy borders. More muskrats are found on given areas of the first type than on either of the other two. The marsh itself produces the food necessary to maintain the muskrats and to induce them to live and breed there. The problem on marshes is largely one of guarding against poaching, and of employing such trapping methods as will insure a sufficient supply of breeding stock from year to year.

PEN RAISING:

It is possible to raise muskrats in pens, but the information at hand fails to demonstrate that it is a profitable undertaking as a fur-production measure. Reproduction under such restraint is not regular, losses occur when the drinking water gets polluted, and from fighting among the animals. More money has to be invested in equipment, feed, and labor than can be realized from the sale of pelts, and for this reason a number of companies that at one time began to raise muskrats in small pens have given up the attempt.

FENCING MARSH AREAS:

Large muskrat marshes as a rule are not fenced, but in some instances fencing may be desirable. Steel posts are satisfactory on high and dry land, but in muck or in wet ground, wooden posts are more serviceable. Posts may be 16 to 20 feet apart and the depth to which they should be placed will depend upon the nature of the soil. The fence may be sunk from 10 to 12 inches below the surface of dry ground, but in marsh and bog lands much deeper sinking will be necessary. Wire of 1-inch mesh, 15½ gauge, is suitable for a muskrat fence.

BREEDING:

Studies are far from complete on the breeding habits of muskrats. The breeding season generally starts late in February and early in March in the northern part of North America, and earlier in the South. One frequently hears the statement that muskrats in marsh areas of Louisiana and Texas breed all the year round. This, however, may yet be open to question. The period of

gestation is believed to be 19 to 21 days. The average litter produced by a young female is about 4. Older females will produce about 6. Young born in the first litter in the spring may produce young in the fall.

PRIME PELTS:

Muskrat pelts taken in fall and early winter are worth hardly half as much as those trapped in February. The fur is still prime in the latter part of March, but the breeding season in most sections has then begun, and trapping continued into April would greatly limit the number of animals for the next season. Muskrat farmers would do well to limit their trapping season to about two months--February and March.

MUSKRAT COMPANIES:

It is contrary to the policy of the department to vouch for the integrity or financial standing of any individual or company. It is suggested that inquiry regarding such matters as they concern the commercial production of muskrats be made of local chambers of commerce, or of better business bureaus, in places where these firms or individuals have their headquarters.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS:

General information regarding the description of muskrats, how the animals live and build their houses, how they behave, what they eat, and what uses are made of their furs, is contained in the following publication of the Department of Agriculture, which may be obtained free of charge:

Farmers' Bulletin No. 869, The Muskrat as a Fur Bearer with Notes on Its Use as Food.

Other publications dealing with muskrat production, not, however, obtainable from the U. S. Department of Agriculture, may be had from publishers, as follows:

Fur Animals of Louisiana, by Stanley C. Arthur, Department of Conservation, New Orleans, La. (Free, but send stamps to cover postage).
The Muskrat Industry in Maryland, by E. Lee LeCompte, 512 Munsey Building, Baltimore, Md. (Free, but send stamps to cover postage).
The Muskrat in New York, by Charles E. Johnson; Bulletin of the Roosevelt Wild Life Forest Experiment Station, vol. 3 no. 2, March, 1925, Syracuse, N. Y., $1.
Fur Farming for Profit, by Frank G. Ashbrook; published by the Macmillan Company, 60 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y., $4.
Successful Muskrat Farming, by Robert G. Hodgson; Black Fox Magazine, 152 W. 42d Street, New York, N. Y., $4.
Practical Muskrat Raising, by A. E. Harding; Black Fox Magazine, 152 W. 42d Street, New York, N. Y., $1.25.
Muskrats and Muskrat Farming, by George S. LaBar, Black Fox Magazine, 152 W. 42d Street, New York, N. Y. $1.

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Areas adapted to muskrat production are of three main classes, grouped in the order of their importance: (1) Marsh areas, (2) swamps, and (3) ponds, lakes, streams, canals, and other bodies of water without marshy borders. More muskrats are found on given areas of the first type than on either of the other two. The marsh itself produces the food necessary to maintain the muskrats and to induce them to live and breed there. The problem on marshes is largely one of guarding against poaching, and of employing trapping methods that will not make it impossible to maintain an adequate breeding stock.

Pen Raising

On the Eastern Shore of Maryland the Bureau of Biological Survey, in cooperation with the University of Maryland and the Maryland State Conservation Department, has conducted experimental work with muskrats in pens. The primary purpose of this work is to find out the fundamental facts pertaining to muskrats, such as length of gestation period, response to various types of feed, cost of feed, and breeding proclivities in confinement. This work shows that although it is possible to raise muskrats in pens, it is not a profitable undertaking as a fur-production measure. Reproduction under such restraint is not regular; and losses result from polluted drinking water and from fighting among the animals. More money has to be invested in equipment, feed, and labor than can be realized from the sale of pelts, and for this reason a number of companies have given up attempts to raise muskrats in small pens.

Fencing Marsh Areas

As a rule large muskrat marshes need not be fenced, but in some instances fencing may be desirable. Steel posts are satisfactory on high and dry land, but in muck or in wet ground, wooden posts are more serviceable. Posts may be 16 to 20 feet apart, the depth to which they are placed depending upon the nature of the soil. The fence may be sunk from 10 to 12 inches below the surface of dry ground, but in marsh and bog lands much deeper sinking will be necessary. Wire of 1-inch mesh, 15-1/2 gage, is suitable for a muskrat fence.

Breeding

Studies are far from complete on the breeding habits of muskrats. The breeding season generally starts late in February and early in March in the northern part of North America, and earlier in the South. One frequently hears

(Over)

the statement that muskrats in marsh areas of Louisiana and Texas breed all the year round. This, however, is still open to question. The Bureau of Biological Survey has found that the period of gestation in carefully controlled matings of pen-raised animals is 29 to 31 days. The average litter produced by a young female numbers about 4. Older females will produce about 6 young. Those born in the first litter in spring may produce young in fall.

Prime Pelts

Muskrat pelts taken in fall and early in winter are worth hardly half as much as those trapped late in winter and early in spring. The fur is still prime in the latter part of March, but the breeding season in most sections has then begun, and trapping continued into April would greatly limit the number of animals for the next season. Muskrat farmers would do well to limit their trapping season to two months--February and March.

Muskrat Companies

It is contrary to the policy of the Department of Agriculture to vouch for the integrity or the financial standing of any individual or company. Inquiry regarding firms or individuals concerned in commercial production of muskrats should be made of local chambers of commerce or better-business bureaus.

Further Suggestions

General information regarding the description of muskrats, how the animals live and build their houses, how they behave, what they eat, and what uses are made of their furs, is contained in Farmers' Bulletin 869, The Muskrat as a Fur Bearer: With Notes on its Use as Food, copies of which may be obtained from the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., for 5¢ each.

Other publications dealing with muskrat production, not, however, obtainable from the Federal Government, may be had from publishers, as follows:

Fur Animals of Louisiana, by Stanley C. Arthur. State Department of Conservation, New Orleans, La. (Free, but send 25¢ in stamps to cover postage.)

The Muskrat Industry in Maryland, by E. Lee LeCompte. Game Division, State Conservation Department, 512 Munsey Building, Baltimore, Md. (Free, but send stamps to cover postage.)

The Muskrat in New York, by Charles E. Johnson. Roosevelt Wild Life Forest Experiment Station, Syracuse, N. Y. 40¢.

Fur Farming for Profit, by Frank G. Ashbrook. Macmillan Company, 60 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. $4.

Successful Muskrat Farming, by Robert G. Hodgson. Black Fox Magazine, 114 East Thirty-second Street, New York, N. Y. $4.

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